

VZCZCXRO8173
PP RUEHGR
DE RUEHWN #1203/01 2571915
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 141915Z SEP 07
FM AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5486
INFO RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 1795
RUEHSJ/AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE PRIORITY 0928
RUCNCOM/EC CARICOM COLLECTIVE
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM J2 MIAMI FL
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM J5 MIAMI FL
RUEHCV/USDAO CARACAS VE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BRIDGETOWN 001203

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

SAN JOSE FOR USAID/OFDA-CALLAHAN AND LEONARD
USAID FOR DCHA/OFDA-THAYER AND LAC/CAR-BOUNCY
SOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAID](#) [EAGR](#) [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [VE](#) [DO](#) [XL](#)

SUBJECT: DOMINICA AFTER DEAN -- VENEZUELA WILL HELP US

REF: STATE 126663

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Dominica has been promised assistance from Venezuela to improve infrastructure, particularly roads and retaining walls, in the aftermath of Hurricane Dean from August 16-17. These pledges far outstrip the modest assistance the USG has been able to provide to date, giving Hugo Chavez another big win in the PR department and further warming Dominica's relations with Venezuela. Additional, heavily publicized disaster assistance from the USG would go a long way towards countering some of the Venezuelan upper hand in defining in the media who Dominica's real friends are. Additional assistance would also increase USG visibility in the region as a tangible deliverable following the June Conference on the Caribbean in Washington. END SUMMARY.

DAMAGE ASSESSMENTS GRAVE

12. (U) Initial assessments have shown that Dominica is suffering from both extensive agricultural and infrastructural damage. Total agricultural damage was estimated at USD 17.8 million, affecting 100 percent of Dominica's crucial banana industry. Infrastructure damage is currently estimated at USD 44 million, mostly to roads, sea walls, and river walls. The extensive damage to infrastructure, particularly to roads, poses a serious safety hazard and a threat to tourism and investment due to the difficulty in transporting people and goods across the island. Hurricane Dean's effects also have long-term consequences. The agriculture sector provides employment to 40 percent of Dominica's labor force, most of which remains idle because of the destruction to crops. Before Hurricane Dean, the International Monetary Fund reported that close to 39 percent of Dominica's population was living below the poverty line. Although no post-Dean statistics have been reported yet, this percentage likely climbed dramatically now that 40 percent of the population instantly became unemployed.

VENEZUELA TO THE RESCUE

13. (U) The United Nations Development Programme recently sent experts to Dominica to assess infrastructure damage, but the donor community is only able to provide for immediate needs and agricultural assistance at this time. As a result, Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit has requested assistance from Venezuela. In addition to providing food, water, and medical supplies within days following the hurricane, and more

recently various tools (shovels, wheel barrows, picks) and mosquito nets, Venezuela is also clearing roads blocked by landslides and fallen trees and sending a team of 20 volunteers to further assess total damage.

14. (U) Venezuelan disaster assistance is in addition to other forms of assistance promised to Dominica over the last two years, which includes low cost oil, petroleum storage tanks, and an oil refinery under the Petrocaribe program, as well as funding the extension of the runway at Melville Hall Airport to allow for larger aircraft. Venezuelan assistance has been well-received in Dominica. Skerrit often praises Hugo Chavez publicly, characterizing him as a good friend of the Caribbean. In February 2007, Chavez visited Dominica and then flew Skerrit to St. Vincent on his own aircraft to sign the Bolivarian Alternative for Latin American (ALBA) agreement. In June 2006, Venezuela announced a USD 29 million housing project in Dominica, just days after Skerrit softened Dominica's claim on Bird Island, an small island disputed between Dominica and Venezuela.

COMMENT: AN OPPORTUNITY

15. (SBU) Additional assistance for Hurricane Dean damage is needed if Dominica is to economically survive the destructive effects of Dean. Although Venezuela's track record on following through with its commitments is spotty at best, Venezuelan promises of assistance are in any event having a substantial public relations impact. While the USG should not try to match Venezuelan assistance dollar for dollar, additional USG assistance is critically needed to provide life support to Dominica's economy. At the same time,

BRIDGETOWN 00001203 002 OF 002

additional USG assistance will share the spotlight as a tangible deliverable of the joint White House-CARICOM communique issued after the June Conference on the Caribbean, which promised to recommit efforts of cooperation in the area of disaster recovery (reftel).
FISHER